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## **GREAT beginning**

### **Program trains workers to rebuild Gulf Coast**

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Construction workers already were in short supply throughout the Gulf Coast before August 2005. After Hurricane Katrina struck that month, the need skyrocketed as rebuilding and recovery efforts got under way.

Nearly one year after launching an ambitious program to put 20,000 new workers into the industry by the end of 2009, organizers say they're on target to reach the goal.

Gulf Rebuild: Education, Advancement, Training is a \$20 million program — both public and private funding — to recruit potential workers and train them free of charge. The four-week course opened in August 2006 on a pilot basis in Jackson, Miss., and at Baton Rouge Community College.

Tim Horst, program manager for GREAT, said that so far, about 4,900 workers in Louisiana and Mississippi have completed the course. Another 3,300 are enrolled.

Between both states, about 80 percent of the graduates are currently working in the construction field.

The program is "making a significant difference in getting the manpower needed for the recovery process," Horst said.

He also said that Baton Rouge has emerged as a leader for GREAT instruction, accounting for about 3,500 course graduates and about 2,900 of the current enrollees.

"It's probably been the flagship of training throughout the Gulf Coast," Horst said.

The program does not offer job guarantees, but those who complete it are offered job-placement assistance.

In launching GREAT, organizers said that nationally, the industry is short roughly 250,000 construction workers, and the goal of 20,000 new workers would only begin to cover the needs of the Gulf Coast.

According to some estimates, \$30 billion is expected to be spent on reconstruction in the state over the next three years.

GREAT was created by the Gulf Coast Workforce Development Initiative, a partnership of government agencies, businesses, trade groups and community organizations.

The Business Roundtable, a Washington, D.C.-based association of 160 chief executive officers, pledged to raise \$5 million for the marketing and recruitment effort. The state has committed \$15 million to run the classes, with the help of federal job training grants.

Some of the private funding has been raised through in-kind donations. Robert Bosch Tool Corp., for example, donated \$75,000 worth of tools and equipment in mid-May.

When they opened the program, organizers of GREAT had two tasks: overcoming the stigma often associated with blue-collar trade jobs and setting up the training classes to churn out workers.

Horst said that through publications and attending job fairs, GREAT representatives are beginning to get the message across that the construction industry provides good pay and a chance for advancement.

Citing research compiled by Alpha Resources, a private marketing group, Horst said that, depending on the job, entry-level workers in the Baton Rouge area start at about \$12-\$14 per hour.

With pay raises, workers can earn up to 50 percent more after their first two years.

Horst said that journeymen pipefitters, who usually reach that level after about four years, can earn about \$24 an hour. With per-diem reimbursements, safety incentives and other bonuses, they can earn the equivalent of more than \$32 an hour.

"Most contractors are holding back, wanting (new workers) to prove their worth before moving them up," Horst said. "But many get pay increases every three to four months."

Horst said GREAT training courses are expected to open soon in southeast Texas. But he acknowledged that program has some challenges ahead.

The program is taking longer to establish in Alabama than anticipated, and organizers are finding a variety of factors that are slowing their progress the closer they get to coastal areas.

"Those other areas are not progressing as rapidly," he said. "There are issues with insurance, people not getting settlements, with block grants, and zoning regulations have not been finalized in some areas."

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